ALBERT SCHWEITZER: FAITH HERO
Psalm 8
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Man is "crowned (by God)...with glory and honor" and made "to have dominion over," to be responsible for, all God's creatures - this Eighth Psalm is magnificently summed up in the life of Dr. Albert Schweitzer. His ninety years of dynamic living make him a "Faith Hero", one whose actions speak louder than words in interpreting Christianity for us.

Schweitzer died in Africa in 1965, so his career is well within the memory of many of us. The name "Schweitzer" simply means "Swiss", indicating that his ancestors had migrated from Switzerland to Alsace on the border between France and Germany. He was born there in 1875, remembered as a vintage year for the wine that region is famous for.

His father Louis was the Lutheran pastor in Kaysersburg,a dignified, gentle, placid, bookish man. When Albert was born, Pastor Schweitzer jumped right over the crib in excitement. Seems he wanted a son. Albert's mother, Adele, was the greater influence on Albert - she was the stronger of the two parents. She herself was a P.K., preacher's kid. Her father was the pastor in a village a little to the south. Though he is long since dead, I understand that his name is still a byword in that area when it comes to subjects of eccentricity, wide learning, a passion for organs, and a fierce temper. Adele managed to pass along all those traits to her son.

If there was ever a person whose adult style could have been predicted by his childhood traits, Schweitzer was such a person. His earliest memory was while he was still in petticoats, watching delightedly while a bee climbed up his arm. Then it stung him and little Albert's shrieks and sobs brought every family member rushing around him to sooth and comfort. He remembered prolonging his crying long after the sting was gone because he enjoyed being the center of all the fuss. What made that memory stick was that he so enjoyed dominating the situation and also the guilty feeling that he was cheating, putting on a show. Those same feelings persisted throughout his life.

Schweitzer vividly remembered his early church-going experience. At age three, he was allowed to go to church. His father was so successful in convincing him that church was a privilege that the elder Schweitzer must have believed it himself. (There's a moral there for parents who want their children to be interested in church.) There in worship little Schweitzer was struck by the awesome vision he saw: The face of the devil was visible, frequently peering right down the center aisle at the congregation. However, always when Pastor Schweitzer was actually praying, the devil vanished. Albert was profoundly impressed with the power of prayer. Somewhat later he found out that the devil's face was the church organist, a bearded man who peered into the mirror at the organ in order to catch his next cue. When the pastor was praying, the organist didn't have to worry about playing, so organist Iltis relaxed and his face couldn't be seen in the organ mirror. (I shudder to think what would have happened if our Betty Lange had been their organist. Little Albert would have seen the radiant face of a guardian angel and then would have observed that his father's prayers banished the angel! It would have completely changed his theology.)

Age nine was a crucial year for Schweitzer. His legs finally grew long enough to reach the organ pedals and within a year the musical prodigy was substituting for the church organist. Also at age nine he became deeply interested in the Bible and began a lifelong study to relate reason to religion. He couldn't understand, for instance, why Jesus' family was poor if they had been given magnificent gifts by the Wise Men. And why did forty days of rain completely cover the whole world including the mountains, when it rained almost as long as that in Alsace and the water never even reached the houses? Childish question, but they were the beginning of his lifelong work to connect faith and reason.

Something else important happened in his ninth year. His friend Henry had a new slingshot and he invited Albert on a bird-shooting expedition. They quickly found a tree with birds chirping merrily away. Henry took aim and so did Albert, who wanted to be one of the fellows, although his conscience made him uncomfortable in this situation. At that very moment the church bells began to ring like a voice from heaven. Albert frantically shooed the birds away so they would be safe. It was the beginning of what he considered his greatest contribution to mankind, the idea of Reverence for life.

By his twenties, Schweitzer was one of the world's greatest organists and the definitive authority on the composer Bach. Today musicians say Bach cannot be fully understood without studying Schweitzer's interpretation of him. Bach and organ continued as major life themes and in his eighties Schweitzer was still working to finish his eight volumes of The Complete Works of J.S.Bach. His lifelong organ recitals in Europe and Americ were a major means of fund-raising for the African hospital he established. His passion to preserve fine organs led a master-of-ceremonies once to introduce Schweitzer like this: "In Africa he saves old natives; in Europe he saves old organs."

Still in his twenties he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Strasbur noted then as the world's greatest liberal university (sort of the University of Chicago of its day, at least according to this Chicago alumnus). His thesis was on Immanuel Kant, who laid the groundwork to make religion and modern science compatible. Here is one of Schweitzer's quotes: "Two things fill the human mind with awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within." - Science, religion. After philosophy, Schweitzer went on to earn another Ph.D., this one in theology with a thesis on the life of Jesus. His monumental book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, is watershed work in Jesus scholarship. He argued that Jesus, an alien to our modern ideas and rooted in his own time and place, saw history and the world in terms of the best thought of his day, on which Jesus imprinted his own creative interpretation.

World-renowned musician, leading scholar, one of the world's greatest theologians and philosophers - no wonder life seemed so good, so very good to Schweitzer. He was the center of attention and praise from all sides. But a question nagged at him: Didn't he owe something to someone for all he was enjoying? He decided one Eastertime that he must pay back life for all its goodness to him. So he resolved to pursue his richly endowed life for ten years and then find some field of service and sacrifice to repay Creation.

One day in the university library before beginning his day's serious study, Schweitz glanced idly at some of the magazines the librarian put out for him regularly. The journal of the Paris Mission Society carried a major article entitled "The Needs of the Congo Mission", a compelling account of the misery of people there and the desperate need of doctors. Schweitzer knew he had his answer. His sermon four weeks later was titled "The Call to Mission" in which he stated that foreign mission work was necessary to atone for wrongs that white Christians had done to underdeveloped peoples - black people. The die was cast for the rest of his life.

Preparation meant to enter medical school while he supported himself and saved for his African mission by continuing as Principal of the Theological School and giving organ concerts. He managed long night hours of studying by repeatedly plunging his feet into cold water to shock himself wide awake. During medical school he met the daughter of the Professor of History, a social worker who helped unwed mothers. While visiting the professor, Schweitzer saw Helene for ten years, always in her father's house, never going out. He was not exactly an ardent suitor. Helene was swept up by Schweitzer's single-minded missionary plans, took graduate nurse training, and suggested to him they would make a good team in Africa. But it would look more proper if they were married, she pointed out. They kissed for the first time on their wedding day. She was a mainstay, although her fragile health forced her to spend increasingly long periods back in Europe away from the oppressive heat and humidity of equatorial Africa. Their forty-five year marriage always

took a back seat to his work, which they both regarded as most crucial, and they were actually together only half their marriage. Schweitzer did not make an outstanding husband.

In 1913 the Schweitzers landed at Lambaréné, West Gabon, on the Atlantic coast of what was then French Equatorial Africa. They took with them all that a new hospital would need for a full year - materials, supplies, medicines - and also a zinc-lined piano, the gift of the Paris Bach Society - zinc-lined as protection against tropical weather. The hospital began the next day when Schweitzer could not postpone treating pathetic ill people who immediately showed up at his door. The first operations took place in a white-washed chicken house. Schweitzer was the only physician in an area of one thousand square miles. The story of the hospital at Lambaréné is the best known aspect of Schweitzer's life. It was rebuilt, moved and enlarged in the 1920's until it housed 500 patients, about half lepers, in seventy-two buildings. Outpatients by the thousands swelled the number treated. The hospital was really a village - blacks and whites mingled and many languages were spoken including both European and tribal tongues. The professional staff of 40 or 50 began to include more and more locally trained Africans. The lives saved and the misery reduced cannot be calculated. There was complete consensus when in 1953 Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and no one was surprised when he used the prize money for the hospital.

Not that the world's verdict was unanimous: Schweitzer's medical methods were criticized as needlessly primitive. He replied he was running a tropical African hospital, not a European one. His huge ego offended some; on the other hand it provided him the single-mindedness and stamina to keep going. He should never have married. He was never really close to his wife and daughter. All of which is to say, he was very human, not perfect. But what a lifetime of achievement and service and sacrifice!

Schweitzer's own estimate of his life was that his greatest contribution was the Reverence for Life concept. I agree. That is what led me to tell you about Schweitzer today. Schweitzer taught in words and in lifelong actions louder than words that all creation has its value, that all life requires from us the same reverence that we feel toward our most loved ones. The will to live motivates all life, he said, and life should be negated only when it is absolutely necessary. There is a great chain of life from which we are not separate - none of us - and in the death of any life, we too suffer a loss.

Even the friends of Schweitzer like to join the humor that results from carrying Reverence for Life to ridiculous extremes. Adlai Stevenson was visiting with Schweitzer and slapped a mosquito which had landed on the doctor's neck. Schweitzer playfully objected: "That was <u>my</u> mosquito." A reporter once called Schweitzer away from his dinner and put a long series of detailed questions to the great man - all about the Reverence for Life ethic. The interview went on and on and Schweitzer got hungrier and hungrier. Finally he said, "You want to know about Reverence for Life? If you let me go and eat my soup while it's warm, you've already practiced Reverence for Life."

Schweitzer never made an absolute out of his concept. He knew that intelligent decisions have to be made. He was, after all, a physician who destroyed live organisms which cause disease. But Schweitzer consistently said mankind is responsible never to destroy life unless there is unavoidable necessity.

That is the reason I thought of Albert Schweitzer on the day after election last November. I heard radio interviews with newly elected Republican Ohio State legislators. What difference would the new Senate majority make? Their jubilant answer: "Well, first it means we can pass a tough death penalty quickly." I was dismayed and ashamed as an Ohioan. And I remembered Schweitzer. Schweitzer's Reverence for Life concept, you see, is one of the major factors in the worldwide movement away from capital punishment. Today most western nations we consider as advanced as we are have no death penalty in their civil codes. Their rates of murder run from one-eighth to one-seventeenth of ours.

It seems to me that if a state like Ohio has real regard or reverence for human life it would look squarely at the facts. My twenty-some years of observing this issue have convinced me completely that there simply is no reason for the death penalty which can stand before the facts. One fact is that having a death penalty does not reduce the number of murders committed. Not one major study contradicts that. In fact, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the existence of capital punishment is connected with increased murder. Florida and Georgia tell that story. Both were extremely active with executions before the 1972 Supreme Court decision that brought everything to a halt for several years. Before 1972 Georgia had more executions than any other state; it also had the highest rate of murders. During the period when Georgia was not permitted to perform executions, the murder rate dropped thirty percent. Florida's murder rate was also high - between second and fifth highest of the states - before executions were halted. With no executions, murder dropped by more than a third. Then in 1978 Florida passed a new, tough death penalty and the number of murders went up ten percent the first year, higher the second.

The state does not make its citizens respect human life by killing people. That should not be such a surprise. That is the reason the California Supreme Court said: "We have concluded that capital punishment...degrades and dehumanizes all who participate in its processes. It is unnecessary to any legitimate goal of the state and is incompatible with the dignity of man and the judicial process." The same line of thinking has led all three main Jewish bodies and most major Christian denominations, including Presbyterians, to denounce officially the death penalty. There are a lot of arguments against it. It has never been and probably never can be applied equally, so there is bitter truth in the saying that it is called capital punishment because those who don't have the capital get the punishment. It is irreversal. If a mistake is made and the wrong person condemned, there is no way to make restitution. There is a very legitimate concern to keep murderers off the streets. That is exactly what prison does, so the death penalty is unnecessary in any case. There is, of course, very real reason for concern for victims of criminal violence. But not one victim has been restored to life by the execution of his murderer. And what about the possibility that murder rates will go up when executions are carried out? There are other, far better ways, to reduce violent crime.

Why do legislators in Ohio move eagerly to reinstate the death penalty? They say they believe it is the popular thing to do. If it is popular, then I am sure popular opinion is ignorant of the facts. I would like to see legislators act on the basis of truth and morality, not with their noses to the ground sniffing the most popular trail. Perhaps people who voted for them would prefer leadership in place of opinion poll sniffing.

Albert Schweitzer's whole career articulated the Christian respect for life. With him I believe it is a sin of the greatest magnitude to willfully and unnecessarily take a human life. That applies equally to an individual who murders and to legal executions by the state. This is a crucial issue right now for Ohioans, for we are both participants in the decision and will be profoundly affected by it. May Christian Reverence for Life and not legalized vengeance prevail in the great State of Ohio.

Almighty God, help us live up to the Psalmist's description that we are crowned with glory and honor. Make us faithful to our responsibility to care for all life, even the life of those we judge guilty, following the Christ who came to save all humankind. In His name we pray.

Amen.